

# PROMOTING AWARENESS OF TEACHING COLLOCATIONS TECHNIQUES TO BEGINNERS (ADJECTIVE-NOUN COLLOCATIONS)

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## Abstract

Since the ELT career is updating itself on daily basis, teachers should develop their teaching techniques to cope with modern teaching methodology. It is essential to experiment theories and modify them to suit various teaching environments. Teaching collocations has become a top priority in language teaching. Therefore, this paper discusses the issue of teaching collocations for beginners. Although a lot of teachers might not agree on teaching collocations before upper intermediate-level, this study claims that exposing low-level learners (especially, beginners) to language chunks rather than individual words enhances their abilities in writing and speaking (communicative power). Learners may know many individual words which they can't use, along with their grammatical knowledge, but they lack the ability to use those words in a range of collocations which pack more meaning into what they say or write. In addition, learning collocations was found also beneficial in developing learners' skills such as critical thinking and autonomous learning.

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**Keywords:** Lower-level, beginners, collocation, teaching, activities

## Introduction

*“Without grammar little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed”* Wilkins D. (1972, 11)

Recently, teaching collocation has become a top priority in language teaching. This paper discusses the issue of teaching collocations for beginners. Although a lot of teachers might not agree on teaching collocations before upper-intermediate-level, it is not helpful to delay the

process of deepening learners' understanding of collocations as this is the way chunks stored in learners' mental lexicon. Exposing low-level learners (especially, beginners) to language chunks rather than individual words enhances their abilities in writing and speaking (communicative power). Learners may know a lot of individual words which they can't use, along with their grammatical knowledge, but they lack the ability to use those words in a range of collocations which pack more meaning into what they say or write. At the same time, the arbitrary nature of collocations encourages learners' autonomy as learners always ask themselves questions like why do I say "long hair and tall man and not vice versa"?

### **What is Collocation**

For the last few years, collocation has come out as an important category of lexical patterning. In many definitions of collocation, the "co-occurrence" of words introduces the core concept of collocations. Therefore, a typical definition of collocation is "words which are statistically much more likely to appear together than random chance suggests" (Lewis M. 2000, 29).

The main focus of this paper will be lexis, specifically, adjective-noun collocation for beginners. It is a fact that forming the mental lexicon of our learners requires more than teaching them a word (Willis 2003). Recognizing single words as individual items is not good for language use. For example, it is not very helpful for students to learn the meaning of the noun "*tea*" without learning the adjective "*strong*", as the other option for learners is to go for "\* *heavy tea*" (Willis D. 2003) (Egyptian beginners make similar mistakes, although they know the meaning of both "*tea*" and "*strong*"). Having learners in mind, a teacher should re-examine the content of his lesson and find useful groups of words (collocations) to be taught to students. (Lewis M. 2009).

Mentioning collocation brings to our attention the term colligation that is pretty much connected to collocation teaching. Colligation is a type of collocation but when a lexical item is connected to a grammatical one. In other words, it refers to co-occurrence of words which is based on the way they function in a syntactic structure or a syntactic pattern. Firth claimed that colligation refers to the relations between words at the grammatical level, i.e. the relations of 'word and sentence classes or of similar categories' instead of between words (1968:181).

This paper aims to highlight the possibility of teaching collocation to beginners as educators have a general belief that collocation suits upper-intermediate and advanced students rather than lower-level ones. Considering lower-level learners, this study hypothesizes that certain types of collocation is effective. In addition, through a closer analysis of lower-level

course books (e.g. Touchstone, Cutting Edge, Headway) teachers can find a huge variety of collocations to draw students' attention to them. This highlights the importance of teachers' awareness of collocation types. Collocation in low-level courses appears in various types such as adjective-noun (e.g. strong tea), verb-noun (e.g. have a shower) and noun-noun collocation (e.g. shower head). This concurs with Lewis (2000) findings that verb-noun, adjective-noun and noun-noun collocations are the most convenient for early stages, as they present language chunks to learners' attention as single choices. Also, adjective-noun collocation is a common area of errors for learners. Therefore, the next section introduces various collocation types which could be beneficial to beginners.

### Collocation types

For the purpose of this essay our attention will be directed to lexical collocation more than grammatical collocation (Colligation; collocation categories noted by Benson et al. 1997, ix). It has become obvious that any lexical collocation is formed of two content words. It is worth mentioning that some other collocation types are formed of more than two words. Therefore, it is recommended to use the term chunks which better describes the nature of collocation. The term chunk refers to a combination of more than one word that conveys a specific meaning as a unit. The most common lexical collocation types as listed by (Stroh P. 2004) are:

- |                   |                              |
|-------------------|------------------------------|
| 1- Adjective-noun | <i>heavy smoker</i>          |
| 2- Noun-verb      | <i>prices fall</i>           |
| 3- Verb-noun      | <i>do the dishes</i>         |
| 4- Verb-Adjective | <i>defend sth vigorously</i> |
| 5- Adverb-verb    | <i>half understood</i>       |

At this stage, it is very crucial to differentiate between collocation, idioms and phrasal verbs. On the one hand, let's agree that every phrasal verb could be considered as a collocation; this relies on the fact that collocation is mainly based on the ideas of co-occurrence, and phrasal verbs are one of the fixed combination in the English language lexical structure. On the other hand, it is crucial to stress the fact that not every collocation is a phrasal verb. Therefore, the next section clarifies the idioms collocation overlap.

### Idioms-collocation overlap

The relationship between idioms and collocations is one of the hottest areas in the study of lexis. Since idioms refer to those fixed chunks not only used by native speakers, but also represents the bulk of their daily language use, it is essential to consider teaching idioms to language learners. Therefore, it is important here to investigate the clear overlap between

idioms (fixed structure) and collocations.

Michael Lewis argued that, it is necessary to accept collocations as a wider concept of idiomaticity to get a clear idea of their nature (Lewis, 2000). Adjective-noun collocations, like other types of collocation, form a cline of idiomaticity that varied from very fixed structures to open collocations. According to The Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English the following categories are used to describe a cline of idiomaticity as follows (Lewis, 2000 & Stroh, 2004):

**Pure idioms:** This refers to lexical combinations that are completely opaque and invariable. They are not predictable, and learners can't rely on the literal meaning of words (e.g. *red tape*).

**Figurative idioms:** they are slightly variable and have one figurative and one literal interpretation (e.g. *green fingers*).

**Restricted collocations:** they have one figurative and one literal element, and there is an arbitrary combinability restriction on one of the elements with other elements outside the combination (e.g. *dry farming*).

**Open collocations:** they consist of elements which are both used in their literal sense, predictable and are freely combinable (e.g. *big flat*).

Consequently, this cline of idiomaticity shows that adjective-noun collocations have many types; some of them wouldn't be convenient for low-level learners to study. This concurs with the claims that sometimes teachers don't have to teach certain types of collocations (Lewis 2000). On the one hand, pure idioms are too difficult for low-level learners. On the other hand, open collocation is too easy to predict by students, and will not enhance students learning of collocation in general. At the same time, collocations that may sound predictable for teachers could be not predictable for students. Therefore, the next section explains what kind of collocations teachers need to consider while deciding on collocations for lower-level learners.

### **Which Collocations are convenient for low-level learners?**

Experience showed that, with regards to teaching collocations to lower-level learners, it is essential for teachers to know what adjective-noun collocations to teach and what to avoid. This concurs with Lewis' claims that teachers may just need to draw students' attention to the important collocations and leave the unimportant ones to students to figure them out (Lewis, 2000). Therefore, in order to enhance students learning, teachers should consider the convenient collocation type that meets real students' level and needs in connection with collocation strength. For lower-level learners, most of what should be taught is medium-strength collocations. According to Jimmie Hill "Collocational" strength of adjective-noun is classified (opacity based) as follows (2000):

**Unique collocations:** Thinking of collocations on a cline from those which are unique/fixed and non-literal “e.g. *red tape*” to those which are predictable “*anice day*”.

**Strong Collocations:** Although not unique, some collocations are strong which make any information of their one part is incomplete without the other (e.g. *rancid butter*).

**Weak collocations:** the example “*red car*” is a weak collocation, as both “red” & “car” can easily co-occur in different collocations. As many things can be “*red*”. In addition, the collocation just carries the literal meaning of its words.

**Medium-strength collocations:** this form the main learning load for beginners’ lessons, and of prime importance in expanding their mental lexicons (Hill, J. 2000). They neither include weak collocations nor strong or unique ones (e.g. *strong coffee, heavy smoker, pretty woman, handsome manetc*).

Practical experience showed that many teachers consider it impossible to introduce collocations to low-level learners, especially in EFL context where students use language in classrooms only. This notion is supported by the test-oriented teaching style that is very common in the Middle East in general. Therefore, the idea of teaching collocations to beginners is not easy to sell to educators. Consequently, this paper is suggesting a deep analysis of collocation type convenience that can be introduced to low-level learners.

As highlighted above the medium-strength collocations is the most convenient type for low-level learners for many reasons. Firstly, it forms the biggest bulk of teaching material introduced to such level of students. Secondly, using medium-strength collocations offers a range of cognitive challenge that exactly suits beginners and elementary students. Thirdly, the range of autonomy introduced with teaching collocation in general is very essential to students at this early stage; according to classroom practices, low-level learners are offered a lot of independent learning opportunities which definitely enhances learners’ performance at advanced stages.

### **Classroom Activities:**

For the purpose of this paper, a number of beginners and elementary course books were consulted to decide on the range of medium-strength collocations load in the teaching material (e.g. Just, Cutting Edge and Headway). In addition, The *Longman dictionary for Common Errors, 1987* and *English Dictionary for Collocations* were also consulted. The last two were consulted for frequency. Drawing on “*Just, Pre-elementary, 2008, Elementry 2006 and Cutting Edge, Elementary (2005)*”, the researcher selected some adjectives to form a collocations list. In addition, nouns that

collocate with these adjectives were carefully selected. Since it is not only frequency that decides our choice as teachers, the researcher selected adjectives and nouns that help students describe people and things which will support their daily life use of language (Adjective-noun collocations) (see table 1).

Table 1: Collocation Grid: Adjective-noun collocations

	Beautiful	pretty	handsome	heavy	early	late	high	narrow	strong	light
woman	×	×		×					?	
man	?		×						×	
dog	×									
weather	×									
smell									×	
Furniture	×			×					?	?
Tea									×	×
coffee									×	×
cheese									×	
sound	×						?			
cigarette									×	×
river	×	×						×		
mountain	×	×					×			
work				×						×
price	?						×			
smoker				×						
Lunch				×	×	×				×
Meal				×	×	×				×
Traffic				×						×

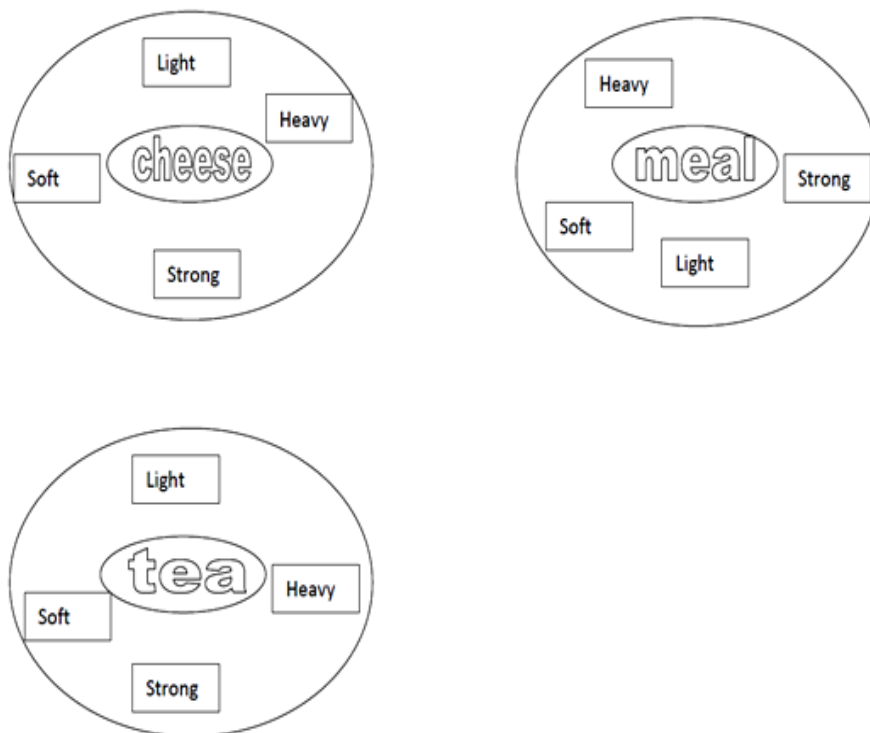
Notes:

? refers to some possible collocations, but I decided not to use them either because they are weak collocations or they are not very frequent.

It is clear that all of the above mentioned collocations are suitable for low-level learners, and are necessary combinations to describe people and things. In addition, the table shows that these adjectives were chosen carefully to avoid students' confusion. Other adjective-noun collocation (e.g. *living room & confused directions*) may be confused with present continuous and past simple forms. Therefore, it is recommended to avoid using them at this early stage despite the fact that they could be described as medium-strength collocations.

Another effective activity that suits low-level learners is the use of collocations grid where students can consolidate their understanding of certain set of adjective-noun collocations (e.g. describing food collocations). The sample below works well with low-level learners.

Cross out the ones which you think are not correct:



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